

**respect**  
Phoneline

Helpline for people using violence  
or abuse in their relationships

**Information for women  
who are concerned  
about their behaviour  
towards male partners**



# Introduction

First of all, we know it can be tough addressing difficult problems. Ringing the Respect Phonenumber is a critical first step towards sorting things out. We want to support you as you make the changes you believe necessary to encourage safety for you, your partner and children (if you have children). Throughout this document we use the term 'partner' to include husband and boyfriend. There is information on the Respect Phonenumber website for women in same-sex relationships: [www.respectphonenumber.org.uk](http://www.respectphonenumber.org.uk)

If you want to discuss anything in this booklet please feel free to ring the **Respect Phonenumber freephone 0808 802 4040** (free from landlines and most mobile phone networks - O2, Orange, T-Mobile, Three (3), Virgin and Vodafone).

We are open Monday-Friday 10-1 and 2pm-5pm If you call outside of these hours please leave your name, telephone number and a convenient and safe time for us to call you back (we can only return calls during our opening hours and we aim to return calls within two working days).

Calls to the Respect Phonenumber are confidential. We do not use technology to identify callers, listening-in or call recording equipment. Visit [www.respectphonenumber.org.uk](http://www.respectphonenumber.org.uk) for more information.

## Is there abuse and violence in your relationship?

Abuse is something that is said or done that hurts another person physically, psychologically/emotionally, sexually or financially. Domestic violence includes a range of abusive behaviours, both physical and non-physical, that may happen a lot or may only happen once in a while.

### **Psychological/emotional abuse**

*Calling your partner names, texting/emailing abusive messages, shouting/swearing, smashing/damaging things, throwing things, putting him down, standing over him, threatening to harm him/the children/yourself, controlling who he sees, checking up on him, not letting him use the car/phone, accusing him of having affairs, threatening to have an affair, threatening to call the police and falsely accuse him of domestic violence/abuse, threatening to take the children away/stop him seeing them.*

### **Physical abuse**

*Pinching, biting, pulling hair, spitting, scratching, slapping, punching/hitting, pushing, kicking, grabbing, using a weapon, scalding/burning him, strangling/choking.*

### **Financial abuse**

*Keeping him short of money, refusing to sign paperwork, using his credit cards without his permission/building up debts, bullying him into making purchases.*

### **Sexual abuse**

*Pressuring him, touching him against his will, forcing sex against his will, sulking or punishing him for not having sex, humiliating him sexually.*

### **Post-separation abuse**

*Stopping him having contact with his children contrary to a reasonable agreement, making contact with him that is unwelcome.*

# Why am I being violent?

Women use violence and abuse for varying reasons:

- Some women are in relationships with men who are systematically abusing them. What we mean by this, is that he is using a **pattern of abusive behaviours and violence that serves to control her** behaviour, decisions, and feelings. In essence, he holds all the **power** in the relationship and she may end up adapting her behaviour according to her partner's wishes to keep things calm.
- Some women in these situations use violence in **self-defence** to try to protect themselves, their children or to escape from their abusive partner.
- Some women in these situations begin to use violence to try to resist their abusive partner's controlling/bullying behaviour. What we mean by the term **resistance** is that she is forcefully protesting against his dominance.
- Some women may also use violence to **retaliate** to their partner's violence, for example a woman hitting her partner back when he has hit her.
- Some women feel angry about things that other people have done to them in the past, and they may be taking that out on their current partner.
- Some women use violence to try to **gain control** over their partner and/or the situation. She may be trying to stop him from doing something he wants to do or make him do something he doesn't want to do.

It is important that you take time to understand why you are using violence/abuse. Looking at your relationship over time can help you identify patterns to these behaviours.

The following scenarios may help you make sense of what is going on in your relationship – some aspects may apply to you and others may not. You will notice the balance of power shift through the scenarios from one partner to the other. The scenarios are based on the essence of real calls to the Respect Phonenumber although names have been changed and details simplified to ease understanding of the woman's motivations to use violence.

## 1. Woman using violence as self-defence to protect herself from her violent partner

### **Yasmin and Ali**

Yasmin rang the Respect Phonenumber saying that she needed help with her violence to her partner, Ali. She was worried because Ali had said he would leave her if she didn't "sort herself out". Yasmin explained that she had badly scratched Ali's face until it bled.

When asked to describe the incident in detail, Yasmin told the phonenumber worker how Ali had pushed her up against a wall when she was shouting in his face. She said that Ali had grabbed her throat and threatened to kill her if she didn't "shut up".

Ali blamed Yasmin afterwards for what happened. When Yasmin said that he shouldn't have grabbed her, he said that she'd drive a saint to it, that he hadn't actually hit her and complained that he was the injured one. Yasmin felt bad about Ali's face and he managed to convince her that if she hadn't shouted at him, he would not have done what he did.

The phonenumber worker asked Yasmin how she felt when Ali grabbed her throat. She started to cry and said that she had been so scared that he would kill her. She said that she clawed at his face to get him to release his grip so that she could breathe. She started to talk about the many other times when Ali had been violent and how angry she gets at times about her situation.

## **Safety**

Yasmin's actions in this situation were self-defence – the force she used would be legally defined as 'necessary, reasonable and proportionate' to protect herself from Ali's attack. She is not a 'perpetrator' and Ali is not a 'victim'. The best course of action for her is to get some good advice from the 24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247 to look at what she can do to keep herself safe and discuss what her options are if Ali doesn't get help and stop his violence.

## **Responsibility**

Ali's violence is unacceptable and he is 100% responsible for his actions. He may be angry/hurt when Yasmin shouts at him but he has choices about how he handles this. He plays down his violence by saying he did not hit Yasmin but grabbing someone's throat is a high risk behaviour. Ali's violence on this occasion is part of a pattern of violence and other abusive behaviours used to systematically maintain power and control over Yasmin. He makes all the decisions in the relationship and gets to say how things should be – if Yasmin disagrees she risks violence from him so he essentially gets his own way.

## 2. Woman using violence as resistance to long-term systematic violence/abuse from her partner

### **Yasmin and Ali**

Yasmin rang the Respect Phonenumber eight months later saying that she really did have a problem now. She explained that she had been cautioned by police when she hit Ali around the head at his parent's home. Yasmin stated that she knew what she had done was wrong but she felt so enraged when Ali joked with his parents that Yasmin had slapped him the other night. In this earlier incident Ali had tried to stop Yasmin going out for the evening with her friends – initially he had done this by trying to make her feel bad about leaving him on his own, then he had spoken negatively about what she was wearing and the friends she was seeing and ultimately he had stood in the door to prevent her leaving. Yasmin had tried to push past to leave and had then slapped Ali. Ali again grabbed Yasmin by her throat against the wall.

### **Responsibility**

Ali ultimately holds the power in the relationship and his actions have the intention of imposing his will on Yasmin. Ali not only stops her going out that evening but leaves her feeling generally fearful of going against his wishes. Furthermore, his behaviour is typical of an abuser when he hides his own violence from his parents and chooses instead to portray Yasmin as the only one with a problem.

Ali does not take responsibility for his violence, choosing to blame Yasmin instead. He will not even begin to change unless he accepts that he has a serious problem.

## **Safety**

It is natural for Yasmin to feel angry in this situation. Ali's portrayal of the situation is unfair and he ultimately got his own way and stopped Yasmin going out for the night.

The best course of action for Yasmin is to again think about how she can keep herself safe – emotionally and physically. Her slapping Ali worsened her situation, leaving her vulnerable to increased violence from him. Ali's violence is likely to continue to escalate with time. It is not something that Yasmin can stop. If she remains in the relationship, Ali's violence and abuse will probably wear her down and may become increasingly dangerous. She may become more isolated from support and she risks a criminal conviction if Ali reports her for using violence. She may also be reluctant to tell the Police about Ali's violence, thinking that they will not believe her because of her past caution.

In the short term Yasmin has generally tried to keep herself safe by going along with Ali's demands or pacifying him in some way. As she becomes increasingly angry about her predicament, she needs to think about whether she can do this indefinitely and what the barriers are to leaving him. Again, she can do this by calling the 24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247.

## **An important note about separation**

Separating from a partner can be a time of increased risk. Leaving a violent and abusive relationship can be an extremely dangerous time because the abuser will feel that they have lost the power and control in the relationship and this sometimes results in the partner (and children) being hurt or killed.

In this example, Ali is a possessive man and has already demonstrated that he is prepared to use violence that could potentially be fatal. If Yasmin decides to leave the relationship she needs to plan how she can do this safely. The 24 hour National Domestic Violence Helpline on 0808 2000 247 can help her to think about this.

### 3. Woman using violence where there is no pattern of behaviour from her

#### **Yasmin and Baz**

Five years later, Yasmin is in a new relationship with Baz. She feels that he is respectful towards her and is understanding about her previous relationship. He is certainly very different to Ali and she enjoys the freedom of being able to regularly see her friends. One evening he says that he doesn't want her to go out with her work colleague Jason. Yasmin tells the Respect Phonenumber worker that she was so incensed by this, that all she could 'see' was Ali in the past stopping her going out and she slapped Baz.

#### **Responsibility**

Yasmin is 100% responsible for slapping Baz. She may not be systematically abusive but her actions are damaging and she needs to get help with her behaviour. She needs to recognise her 'build up' in this situation and how her previous experiences with Ali have shaped how she thinks and feels towards Baz. She needs to find alternative ways to assert her position whilst respecting Baz's. The Respect Phonenumber can discuss what the best help may be in this situation.

## **Safety**

Only time will tell whether Baz's request that Yasmin not go out that night was reasonable (because they had not seen much of each other and he wanted to spend time with her) or unreasonable (because it was an early warning indicator that he feels entitled to control what she does). If Baz is an abusive man, Yasmin will also get indicators about this from his response to her asserting her position.

As a survivor of domestic violence, Yasmin is very alert to her new partner's behaviour. For some women, this means that they accurately pick up early warning signals that a new partner is abusive and they need to find ways to protect themselves without using violence. For others, it means that their judgement may be skewed by past experiences so that a partner's behaviour is misinterpreted as threatening rather than innocent and reasonable.

## 4. Woman using a pattern of violence/abuse towards her partner

### **Esther and Errol**

Esther rang the Respect Phonenumber distraught that her partner of five years, Errol, had left her. She said that she was very ashamed that she had punched him on a number of occasions. She said that she got very jealous when he went out and would wind herself up and get drunk during the evening, interrogating him, accusing him of having affairs and attacking him on his return. She said that Errol never retaliated. Esther admitted also checking Errol's texts and emails without his knowledge.

Esther spoke about how kind and caring Errol was. She said that he was keen to care for their children and do domestic chores and she couldn't understand why whatever he did was never good enough for her. She regularly criticised him for not being a 'real man' when he didn't want sex.

Esther said that she had grown up witnessing violence between her parents and spoke of how her father would disappear after incidents and her mother would spend days crying until he returned.

### **Responsibility**

Esther talked to the Respect Phonenumber to get a better understanding about why she is abusive and began thinking about her choices in handling this differently. Her violence/abuse is unacceptable and

has ultimately led to what she feared most – losing Errol. Whilst her alcohol use alone is not causing the violence – there are times when Esther drinks and she is not violent – the alcohol can mean that any violence she uses is more serious. If she is unable to stop her drinking on her own, she also needs help with that.

[www.alcoholconcern.org.uk](http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk)

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

## **Safety**

Again, the Respect Phonenumber can discuss with Esther the help she needs to address her abusive behaviour and to explore her beliefs about what relationships are like. Her childhood experiences of domestic violence and the roles her parents took will have shaped how she believes that men and women should behave in relationships. She says that she is fearful of the men in her life leaving her and states that she appears to drive them away with the abusive behaviour that she herself despised as a child. She sees it as a threat when Errol wants to share the responsibility of childcare – what she considers to be her ‘territory’. Furthermore she states that she uses sex to try to reassure herself that Errol wants to be with her and feels rejected when he doesn’t – and yet it is possible that he does not want to be intimate due to her abuse of him.

Whatever the beliefs that Esther has learnt from her childhood and the trauma she has experienced, as an adult she is responsible for her actions and for changing her behaviour. Her violence/abuse is hurting Errol and she also needs to face the fact that her children are being affected by their mother’s behaviour however much she tries to convince herself that the violence is not as bad as that which she grew up with.

Esther needs ongoing help recognising her 'build up' in these situations, exploring her beliefs, learning to tolerate sometimes overwhelming feelings and ultimately finding non-abusive ways to behave. In the short term she may benefit from some of the suggestions later in this pack.

## **A note about affairs**

Esther is jealous and suspicious that Errol is unfaithful. Her fears and insecurities about this are her responsibility to manage. Even if her fears were true, it remains unacceptable to use violence/abuse. There are always choices about how to handle even difficult situations.

## **5. Woman using violence who is also experiencing violence from her partner**

Sometimes it's difficult to work out what is going on in a relationship when both parties are using violence/abuse. An initial conversation with the Respect Phoneline may start to give some clarity and it can help you focus on what the risks are and how they can best be managed so that everyone is safe. The following scenario demonstrates this.

## **Sinead and Gareth**

Sinead rang the Respect Phonenumber wanting help with her violence to her long-term partner Gareth. She said that there had always been violence in the relationship but that more recently she had to attend hospital when Gareth had pushed her backwards over a table and held her down on the floor. Sinead said that she knew Gareth's violence was unacceptable on this occasion but that she had also wrongly punched him and used violence on numerous other occasions causing him injuries.

Sinead said that she had been so ashamed that she avoided calling the Respect Phonenumber. She said she hated herself for turning into everything that she despised. Sinead said that she felt she was constantly 'on the alert' and would 'fly off the handle' at minor things that Gareth did. She said that her feelings were so intense when she felt slighted or if things didn't go her way that she would 'rage' at him for hours. She would also feel anxious, having flashbacks and panic attacks. At other times she said that she felt completely numb and would withdraw from Gareth, sometimes self-harming. She said her unpredictability would confuse him completely. She said that she thought her history of sexual abuse as a child and violence from former partners had made her determined to never be hurt again.

Sinead said that she loved Gareth and was determined to make the relationship work. She believed that if she wasn't violent, then Gareth wouldn't be either.

## **Responsibility and Safety**

Sinead can discuss with the Respect Phonenumber where she can get help from someone who understands domestic violence and trauma. She needs to explore how her past abuse has shaped her present relationships and help her to see the choices she does have to keep herself and her partner safe (emotionally and physically). It would help her explore her anger at men and find a way to manage feeling vulnerable at times in a relationship without feeling completely powerless/using violence. In the short term she may benefit from some of the suggestions later in this pack.

Gareth also needs to address his violence and he too can call the Respect Phonenumber. Whatever Sinead is doing, the safest thing he can do when he sees an incident escalating that he thinks will be unsafe is to leave the house. He needs to do this without using any violence, including not restraining Sinead, which may exacerbate the situation if it triggers feelings for her in relation to being sexually abused.

If both parties access help, only time will tell if this relationship can be healthy. If violence/abuse continues, Sinead needs to consider living separately and possibly even ending the relationship, especially if there are children.

## Women using violence other than in self-defence

For women whose violence is not about self-defence, research<sup>1</sup> has shown the following to be common goals of such behaviour:

- “ I wanted to gain control over a chaotic situation ”
- “ I wanted him to stop abusing me ”
- “ I wanted to stand up for myself ”
- “ I wanted him to pay attention to me ”
- “ I wanted him to take some responsibility ”
- “ I wanted him to respect me ”
- “ I wanted him to pay for his behaviour ”
- “ I wanted to hurt him because he threatened my family ”
- “ I wanted to show him I am tough ”

Think about a time when you were violent towards your partner:

What did you do?

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What were you trying to achieve?

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What was the outcome:

In the short term?

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In the long term?

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What was the impact of this on your partner? (did it harm him?, did he dismiss your view?, was he violent?)

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Did you get what you wanted? (i.e. did it work or did it make it worse?)

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How did you feel about yourself after this incident?

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If you have children:

In what ways have you been concerned about how your actions or your partner's actions have affected your children?

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How do you want to be viewed by your children?

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## Remember:

There are negative lasting consequences to using violence for:

- ! your partner
- ! your children
- ! how you view yourself
- ! yourself if your partner retaliates
- ! the health of the relationship

# What can I do?

## Spot the warning signs!

This section will help you to be more aware of when things are escalating and you're getting into a situation where you may be violent/abusive towards your partner. The more you are aware of your 'warning signs', the more you will be able to stop yourself from being abusive.

When you notice the following 'warning signs' in yourself, do something about it that works for you. We give some suggestions further down.

### Sore points

Sore points are typical situations in which you've been abusive in the past. Examples might include conflicts over domestic chores, child care responsibilities, what is considered 'fair' in the relationship, parenting, money, relatives, friends, sex, or who is right about something that happened in the past. You may be particularly touchy when tired, at a particular time of day, when you've not eaten recently, when you are premenstrual or pregnant, when your partner walks away/goes out or when your partner does something that reminds you of a past hurtful situation.

Make a note of your typical sore points:

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## **Physical warning signs**

Think about what is happening for you physically as you begin to build towards violence and abuse:

What do you feel in your body? For example, tension in your stomach/shoulders/chest/neck/jaw, heat, changes in breathing and heart rate – you may struggle to breathe or your heart races.

You might find you have difficulty concentrating, feel light-headed/faint/dizzy or nauseous or feel edgy/keyed up. You might notice that you over-indulge in food or self-harm.

Think about what your body language may be at this time. For example, do you point a finger, close your fist, flail your arms, pace up and down the room, follow your partner from room to room, raise your voice or shout, glare at him, interrupt, go quiet, issue orders?

Make a note of your physical warning signs:

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## **Emotional warning signs**

You may be aware of different feelings that come just before you become abusive or violent. For example, feeling powerless, resentful, angry, trapped, confused, persecuted, got at, challenged, guilty, embarrassed, upset, hurt, rejected, unloved, ignored. These are your emotional warning signs. If you know that you have been

abusive in the past when you have felt embarrassed or guilty, then it's important that you are able to recognise these emotional warning signs in the future. Anger and hurt and all these other feelings are unpleasant and can be difficult to manage, but they do not have to lead to violence. There will be times in your life when you have dealt with difficult feelings without being violent or abusive.

Sometimes, emotions that are 'triggered' in particular situations are more to do with past experiences than the present day issue. In the previous scenarios, Esther for example, had fears (without any grounds) that Errol spending an evening with friends meant that he would leave her, which likely relates more to her childhood experiences than the current situation.

Make a note of your emotional warning signs:

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## **Mental warning signs**

What are you thinking just before you are abusive? Often you will be winding yourself up, thinking negative things about your partner or trying to justify yourself. This is negative self-talk. It can include phrases like "he's doing this deliberately to wind me up", "he never listens to me", or "he's such a lazy bastard", "this is so unfair", "this always happens to me".

Sinead in the previous scenarios is likely to have been thinking along the lines of "he's not going to make a mug out of me", "who does he think he is", "I'm not having that anymore".

Make a note of the negative self-talk/typical thoughts you have as you get closer to being abusive:

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There may also be things you *don't* think about, such as how you have successfully dealt with these emotions/thoughts in the past, or how you may be putting yourself and/or your loved ones at risk if you react, or how some women think that being violent to a man will not hurt him. Make a note of the things you *don't* think about:

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# I recognise the warning signs – now what?

What has worked for you in other difficult situations that hasn't got you into trouble?

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Below are suggestions that women have said are useful when they recognise that the situation is escalating. If you can 'take a pause' in some way, it gives you breathing space to think about how you want to handle the situation.

For some women, backing off to collect themselves feels like they've let him win or that they're passive but if this means you can later present your argument in a way that is more likely to be heard, that's the wise thing to do.

If you need to take yourself right away somewhere safe to get control of your behaviour, some women find the following useful:

- going for a walk/jog
- meditating/relaxation exercises
- listening to music
- ringing up a friend to talk through the dilemma
- writing things down to look for patterns
- praying

*Don't* drink alcohol or take drugs

*Don't* drive

**If you think that walking away in an argument makes the situation worse, discuss this with the Respect Phonenumber.**

During this time, you might like to consider the following:

- You cannot control your partner's behaviour – you can only control your own. It may be perfectly reasonable to want him to do something but you cannot make him do it.
- You cannot 'love away' the things you don't like about your partner nor 'make him' be something he's not. For example, it is a misconception that if you love someone enough who is an alcoholic they will stop drinking. If someone is an alcoholic, only they can change themselves.
- Are your expectations of your partner reasonable when you step back from the situation? If not, what would be considered a fair position?
- Your anger at his actions or inaction may be justified but this doesn't need to lead to you being violent and doesn't justify your violence. How else can you stand up for yourself without using violence? If you are continually unhappy in this relationship, what are the barriers to leaving?

- Does your anger hide far more vulnerable feelings that you need to take care of? Just because you may feel powerless doesn't mean you don't have any options here. What would you advise a friend to do in this situation?
- How is showing any vulnerability received by your partner? Does he genuinely listen, ridicule you or use it against you later?
- Being open and direct about how you feel is not a sign of weakness. A respectful partner is less likely to become defensive hearing you express yourself if you 'own' your feelings (starting your sentences with the word 'I' rather than the more blaming word 'you' as an example) and think carefully about the words you use.
- Have safety as the most important priority at all times. For example, be aware of your surroundings – arguing in the kitchen where knives are available or around stairs for example can be dangerous. Take time to think about how you can exit the house if it gets unsafe. Some women who use violence are met with even more serious violence from their partners.
- Stay in the 'present'. Drifting into the pain of past hurts or resentments or fear and worry of future uncertainties can leave us feeling overwhelmed by emotions. If you can 'catch' your mind wandering in this way, you can take control of steering your life in the direction that is right for you.

**Men and women have been killed by their partners.**

**Picking up a weapon, even in self-defence,  
may lead to you causing him serious injury  
and it could be turned against you.**

1 Larance, L.Y., Hoffman-Ruzicka, A., and Shivas, J. (2009). *VISTA Program Curriculum: Serving women who use force in intimate heterosexual relationships*. Jersey Battered Women's Service. Morristown, NJ: Jersey Center for Nonviolence. Retrieved from [www.jbsw.org](http://www.jbsw.org)

# Your notes

The information in this booklet is based on our experiences on the Respect Phoneline with women using violence and the Men's Advice Line with men experiencing violence.



**Access for all**

- **Telephone interpreting service available**
- **Text Relay**

The Helplines  
Association

**Member**

**Quality Standard**

The Respect Phoneline  
has been accredited by  
The Helplines Association



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[www.blackiceprint.com](http://www.blackiceprint.com)